

## What Kind of a Thing is Twitter?

Do you ever eavesdrop on random people? At the office, on the subway, in a park — if you're quiet, you can listen to people chat. If you do, you quickly find that, for the most part, they have conversations that seem perfectly boring. This is most obvious on IRC (Internet text chat) where, since the conversations are entirely textual, they can be perfectly transcribed. If you look at the transcripts later, you find they're often almost unreadable — even in channels dedicated to very technical topics, you'll find hours of conversation about someone's dog.

Such conversation clearly does not perform an objective information-sharing function — the relevant facts about the dog can be laid out in a paragraph (if that). It serves a social function — a function with a deep evolutionary history. Primates get to know each other through grooming each other's fur. But that's time-consuming; as a result, primates rarely form groups larger than 25. One of the big breakthroughs for humans was moving from grooming to gossip. Instead of 25 people, the average human knows 150. And so we talk, and as we talk we reveal our personalities to each other: the things we care about, the way we think, the subjects we understand. We make friends through this process of conversation and personality reveal, even though objectively the conversation is about matters that seem trivial. When it comes to our friends, we know a lot of trivia.

What Twitter<sup>1</sup> does is automate this process. Instead of telling your bit of gossip or joke or humdrum story or minor complaint to each of your friends as you see them, you tell it once to Twitter, and then all your friends can see it. And just like the transition from grooming to gossip, Twitter allows for an explosion in the number of people we know. Where, in the past, it was only practical to have these kinds of close, chatty friendships with a handful of people (even using a technology like IM), now — using the power of the Web to bridge time and space — you can have them with hundreds.

But the relationships need not be symmetrical. One of the things that's clear about celebrities in the age of television is that they take advantage of this innate social sense. (*Fahrenheit 451* is caustic on this subject.) We see these people all the time, we listen to them, we watch them — and we come to feel as if we *know* them. And so, naturally, our innate social sense kicks in and we want to hear their gossip — a need tabloids try their best to fill.

Twitter provides a more raw, unmediated access to celebrity gossip. Instead of hearing about it second-hand from TV news, we hear about it straight from them. Oprah, of course, has been a pioneer of this: with a daily long-form television show, she's been able to cultivate (and monetize) a friendship with millions. But most celebrities don't have that kind of access to their "followers." They do on Twitter.

The catch, of course, is that it's all somewhat fake. What you see on Oprah's show isn't the real Oprah; it's a hyperreal Oprah, a carefully-crafted simulation of a gregarious friend chatting with you in your living room — makeup, lighting, sets, and script are all carefully planned to seem "natural." And most Twitter feeds are the same — humorists spend days polishing the one-liner they seem to carelessly toss off, politicians have speechwriters thinking up soundbites that they can tweet.

But it's not just fake, it's empty. The reason such apparently boring conversation is interesting is because the act of conversation itself reveals your personality. We assume we know the people whose petty complaints and daily routines we've heard so much about because, traditionally, the only way to hear such things was to get to know them well. But it's impossible to really know someone through sanitized soundbites. In 140 characters, there's little room for the nuances of personality such conversation typically reveals. So, like Oprah's audience, we all see the carefully-prepared facade people *want* to present, and come away thinking that we know them better than we really do.

With people we know in "real life," this isn't such a big deal. We already know their personality; Twitter simply helps maintain our relationship by keeping us up-to-date. And while, in doing so, it lets us maintain vastly more relationships, I'm not sure this is a bad thing. Many people are starved for human relationship — we spend most of our lives at the office, or at home watching TV and playing video games. Most Americans live in suburbs with no street life and even in cities everyone's wearing iPods and thus unable to stop and chat. If Twitter can help bring us together in an increasingly isolated world, then all the better (and, it seems, with some positive political consequences as well).

But, for the people we don't know, it has the effect of making them all Oprah. In the same way her millions of fans trust her book ([and movie and health and plastic surgery...](#)) recommendations unquestioningly, because they feel that they know her, Twitter can make us trust other celebrities. If you feel like your Senator is a personal friend (and how can you not, after hearing them tell you about their struggle to lose weight and the guy they met at the gym?), then how could you possibly vote against them?

This isn't new, of course. It goes back as far as radio (possibly further). Pappy O'Daniel did it in Texas in the 1940s. He got on the radio every day at noon and just chatted, like an old friend — sang a few songs, read a little of his poetry, but mostly he just talked with quiet cheer. And people treated him like a friend: he asked them to buy his flour (simply other companies' flour repackaged with his picture on it and resold at a higher price) and they bought it. He asked them to vote for him and they elected him Governor of Texas in a landslide — whereupon, not knowing anything about politics, he plunged the state government into turmoil and disaster. But he kept up those daily broadcasts — now conducted from the Governor's mansion — and they kept on reelecting him. He was their friend, after all.

Twitter probably isn't going to make THE\_REAL\_SHAQ governor, but I don't think it's crazy to worry about it having similar effects. Luckily, it also provides the tools for undoing these relationships. For the housewives stuck at home with the TV, Oprah is the only option. But on Twitter, at the same time you sign up to hear from Oprah, you can also follow — and cement your relationship with — more real friends. And it's a good thing too, because with all these fake friends running around, we're going to need all the real ones we can get.

I'll say Twitter because it's become the accepted term, but obviously this applies to similar services like identi.ca. ■

You should follow me on twitter [here](#).

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